

**Jan Kwapisz, David Petrain, Mikołaj Szymański (ed.), *The Muse at Play: Riddles and Wordplay in Greek and Latin Poetry. Beiträge zur Altertumskunde, Bd. 305.* Berlin; Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2013. Pp. ix, 420. ISBN 9783110270006. \$154.00.**

**Reviewed by Floris Overduin, Radboud University Nijmegen (f.overduin@let.ru.nl)**

This volume contains the proceedings of the ΜΟΥΣΑ ΠΑΙΖΕΙ conference, which was organized by Jan Kwapisz in Warsaw in May 2011. The eighteen papers it contains, all in English, are preceded by a thirty-page introduction written by Joshua Katz. As one would expect, all papers deal with, or reflect on, elements that can be captured under the broad denominators of riddle and wordplay, although the two of course do not necessarily have much in common. As Kwapisz mentions in the preface, this volume can be seen as explorations following up on Christine Luz's recent monograph on *technopaegnia* (p. v).<sup>1</sup> The papers have been divided into five broad categories ('Discourses of Play', 'The Ancient Riddle', 'Visual Poetry in the Text and on the Stone', 'Case Studies', and 'Playful Reception'). In addition to this thematic organization, the papers also broadly represent, as far as possible, chronological source material. The first paper deals with the archaic symposium, the last ends in our time.

Katz's entertaining introduction, in line with the playfulness of the subject, sketches an overview of that kind of wordplay games – the acrostic – and some of the major finds of the last century, as well as the varying degrees of success in proving their validity in each case. The introduction proceeds with (p)reviews of the eighteen papers, but also with tantalizing references to promising presentations that did not end up in this volume, mainly because they will appear in writing elsewhere in some form or other. The introduction comes with a useful bibliography.

The first two papers are the only ones dealing with pre-Hellenistic material. Ewen Bowie concentrates on fragments 357-9 PMG of Anacreon and their use in a sympotic context. The sort of wordplay Bowie's getting at concerns the way in which the elusive interpretation of words (e.g. διοσκέω in fr. 359.3 PMG) can be considered a tantalizing way of παίζειν, in the sense of (verbal) playfulness, but also of 'teasing'. As the poet wilfully provides incomplete information, the audience has to decide for itself what to make of the poem. In a certain way this sort of poetry, particularly in a symposium, could be considered part of a sympotic riddle (γρῖφος) tradition, but this means that the distinction between 'proper' riddles and less than straightforward poetic imagery becomes particularly blurred.

Pauline LeVen's contribution looks at the late classical New Music, and the mechanisms of its swollen, dithyrambic language: how does such riddling vocabulary (Timotheus' *Persians* is a case in point) function on stage, rather than when read slowly in a quiet corner? Rather than considering such poets as proto-Alexandrian, LeVen points out that their riddling does not obstruct direct interpretation, as opposed to e.g. Lycophron's. Her unexpected use of examples from Middle Comedy to show how dithyrambic riddles work in practice, bringing the symposium to the stage, is insightful.

Rebecca Benefiel looks at some of the *technopaegnia*-material (magic squares, alphabet jumbles, and plain riddles) among Pompeian graffiti, showing that wordplay was not at all confined to the sympotic elite. Moreover, her examples of graffito-writers commenting on previous vandals on the same wall, shows that capping was not limited to symposiastic epigrammatists, but practised as widely as it is nowadays on the toilet door of a not-so-fancy pub. Even professional *scriptores*, such as Aemilius Celer, responsible for all kinds of painted posters in Pompeii, could not resist the playful attraction of a signature in reverse, as is shown by the Suilimea-inscription.

Christine Luz gives a somewhat fluid typology of the proper riddles (excluding the oracles and arithmetical problems) in book fourteen of the *Greek Anthology*, as she shows that all these riddles are more or less working their disguise through analogy (or metonymy), double meaning (or punning), paradox, or a thorough knowledge of mythology, including the special category of well-known mythical murders. It is the reader's task to decode each individual element and reconstruct the new, actual meaning of the enigma. It is interesting that these γρίφοι do not refer to their riddle status, or specifically invite their readers to solve them ("guess who/what I am?"), despite the fact that that is clearly their aim, which separates them formally from αἰνίγματα (riddle questions). Moreover, as Luz points out, it is not the usually quite mundane object described that is outlandish, but only its riddling description.

The contribution of Lisa Maurizio concerns Heraclitus' 'oracular' style and its relation to oracular practice in Delphi, as evidenced, though not unproblematically (on which see the contribution of Naerenbout and Beerden), by Herodotus. She shows that similarities between the two are not merely stylistic or superficial. Not only a riddling nature in general, but aural devices, metaphor, ambiguity (particularly homonymy), and a common view of the possibility of knowledge are shared by both, indicating the poet's indebtedness to the Pythia, rather than to his literary predecessors.

Frederick Naerebout and Kim Beerden's piece too is concerned with oracles and the metaphorical and oral nature of riddles. They question the nature of oracular ambiguity and point out that, compared with the epigraphic evidence from daily oracles from Dodona and Delphi, riddling oracles must have been the exception rather than the rule, all but limited to literary fiction. From the perspective of divination, ambiguity, even in oracles, just does not make sense. There may thus have been many reasons for including riddling oracles in a narrative, but authenticity was never really one of them.

Jan Kwapisz traces the history and possibility of lost riddle books, (pseudepigraphical) compilations of material from Simonides and Cleobulina, as well as the remains of the early Hellenistic treatise *On Riddles* by Clearchus of Soli, the Παίγνια of Philitas of Cos, and the poems of Simias of Rhodes. He reconstructs how the Παίγνια, Philitas' collection of riddling poetry, may well have been a book separate from his Ἐπιγράμματα. The best idea in this paper concerns Simias' 'book' of innovative and clever polymetrics, for which his pattern poem *Egg* may have acted as a *sphragis*.

The paper of Christophe Cusset and Antje Kolde deals with the notoriously difficult name riddles in Lycophron's *Alexandra*. Focusing on frequently used animal names (e.g. 'dog') and periphrases of deities, they point out several approaches to solving the riddler's efforts. Some of these (e.g., the presumed anagrammatic cryptogram on p. 170, or the emphasis on σπη hinting at the name Aegestes on p. 176) are less convincing than others, but their examples of how to "reconstruct the referent-character" (p. 172) are welcome indeed, as Cusset and Kolde

show how to “develop a strategy for deciphering his γρῖφοι”. Attention is paid to how original names have been replaced by multiple words, which together help to make an identification within the lexical or metaphorical range offered by these circumlocutions.

Erin Sebo discusses how the hundred riddles in Symphosius’ Latin collection of *Aenigmata* were transformed from oral folkloric riddling to a sophisticated, Saturnalian, intertextual literary genre. Through her discussion she makes clear that the collection as a whole is more than the sum of its riddles, and throws light on the meta-enigma: why did Symphosius give away the answer to each of the riddles upfront?

The ‘Visual Poetry’ section starts with Alexandra Pappas’ piece on the Greek calligrams, all of which are introduced, translated and summarized neatly, and followed by an investigation of the issues of reader-response to these objects, and the way in which these poems play with their particular visual status as objects that have been constructed, but also need deconstruction to be read. Their poets do not limit themselves to ecphrastic epigrams of absent objects, but add a new dimension to the tradition of votive poetry.

Michael Sullivan tackles the famous Nicandrian acrostic in *Theriaca* 345-53 by focusing on its fable-like context, thus seeking to connect it to the Aesopic αἴτιος, but via Callimachus’ take on the fable in the *Iambs*. While the topic of immortality has often been addressed before in connection to this passage, Sullivan’s connection to the similar (though defective) acrostic in the *Alexipharmaca*, combined with the etymology of Nicander’s name (ΝΙΚ-ΑΝΔΡΟΣ, ‘victory of man’) shows new possibilities of interpretation.

Both Valentina Garulli and Rachel Mairs bring in epigraphic material containing acrostics in their contributions. Garulli presents the first results of a project in progress on Greek verse inscriptions, offering a detailed catalogue of fourteen specimens (including mesostics and telestics), in various metres, including more exotic varieties such as priapeans and sotadeans. General discussion of the material, although preliminary, yields interesting observations. Rachel Mairs includes Latin material in her study of inscriptional acrostics, which shows a remarkable concentration of the phenomenon at hand in frontier regions such as Lower Nubia, and Arachosia in the Far East. Rather than considering this a mere soldier affair, Mairs argues for the locals’ urge to display their cultural affinity, albeit in quite a hyperbolic way, using arcane vocabulary, Homeric or Vergilian references, and literary devices such as acrostics, as expressions of their “cultural insecurity” (p. 281).

The fourth section (‘Case studies’) opens with Krystyna Bartol’s piece on anacyclic verses (in which the word order of a given verse is changed while retaining its metrical shape), focusing on *P. Sorb.* 72<sup>v</sup>, a speech by Eros in the shape of a comic prologue or a dramatic hypothesis. Addressing the purpose of the odd piece, Bartol suggests it may in fact be a school riddle, with the play’s title as its solution. Despite several interesting observations, it remains unclear how the poem’s supposed clues translate to the poem’s riddling status.

In his threefold paper Jerzy Danielewicz solves a problem, detects an acrostic and solves a salacious inscriptional riddle in three different texts, the most fascinating of which is the ingenious cracking of the ostensibly nonsensical palindrome of *SH* 996.13.

The last case study deals with Ausonius’ *Griphus ternarii numeri*, in which Dunstan Lowe provides a translation, a discussion of its themes and of the tradition of which the poem should be considered to be part, followed by a discussion of the possible solution to the riddle.

Although one solution can be found in a historical reading of the poem, Lowe argues that, despite its name, the poem is not really a *griphus* begging to be solved.

The concluding 'Playful Receptions' section contains two pieces, the first of which is by Michael Fontaine. It deals with Joannes Burmeister's recently discovered Neo-Latin play *Mater-Virgo*, which combines Plautine reception (particularly of the *Aulularia*) with Protestant *parodia sacra*. Fontaine's discussion of the various layers of Burmeister's playfulness is insightful, although as a whole the piece would perhaps be better suited to a volume on parody than one on riddles and wordplay. The final paper, by Barbara Milewska-Ważbińska, is a nice conclusion to this volume, in which she gives an overview of the reception of *poesis artificiosa* since the Renaissance, focusing on the Polish tradition.

Although many papers offer interesting new insights in known material, their merit as a whole lies in their presentation of little known material to those interested in the variety of forms riddles and wordplay can take. By collecting very different examples from both Greek and Latin, from literature and subliterate genres, conventional forms (epigram) and exotic ones (magic squares, alphabet jumbles, palindromes), these contributors present a broad gamut of possibilities, and a fascinating overview of the sort of creativity that drives the playful mind, then as much as now. With a few exceptions, the nature of this volume does not promote radical new ideas or breakthroughs in the study of wordplay, but as an excellent and varied way to bring the subject to the eyes of interested readers, it is welcome indeed.

The volume is nicely produced (and all but free of errors), with both an *index locorum* and a general index.

---

#### Notes:

1. BMCR [2011.03.61](#).